

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor**  
**“The Architect and the Architecture”**  
**Psalm 8**  
**Trinity Sunday**  
**May 30, 2010**

Psalm 8 is a familiar psalm, a psalm much loved by many, a psalm of praise. In the line-up of Psalms that are found in the Bible, it follows a string of five psalms of lament. Thus, it is a burst of praise which comes on the heels of much sorrow. Some suggest that its very placement here makes a theological statement—that it is out of pain and struggle that, by God’s grace, joy emerges.

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Psalm 8 is poetry. It is poetry both for living and for dying.

Mary Pipher, in her wonderful book entitled *The Shelter of Each Other*, writes, “In 1992 my mother was dying. I called her daily and once a week I made the long drive to her state to hold her hand and coax her to eat. I thought of my mother on the Fourth of July as, strong and healthy, I sat in a red-and-white tent by a blue lake. The fiddler dressed in a cream-colored summer suit...played “Red Wing” [and] “Boil that Cabbage Down”...I thought to myself, My mother would enjoy this, especially “Red Wing,” which she used to sing.”

Mary Pipher goes on to write of how she and her mother had been having important talks that summer. Mary’s mother told Mary about her regrets—that she had never been to Europe or read the books she planned to read when she retired. They talked about the things she was proud of—her medical career, her work in Korea, her seven children. Mary asked her what she believed would happen after she died. She said that she expected to be with her husband and her parents, but beyond that, she said, “I don’t know what the architecture will be like up there.”

Mary Pipher continues, “At noon on that Fourth of July, when [my mother] was ill and too far away for me to see, my husband and I rode on a barge filled with bluegrass musicians. The sunlight danced on the water and turned our shoulders red...I found myself watching a mother in a black bikini play with her little daughter in the water. She swirled her around, splashed her and encouraged her to dunk her head. They seemed so connected and happy...I wanted to shout at them, ‘Love each other while you can.’

Later, at the citywide fireworks display, I lay on the blanket with my husband...We were surrounded by storms—to the north and west were lightning and hail, to the south a wall cloud and to the west, ominous dark thunderheads...As we watched [the sky], I thought of my mother far away, sleeping with her oxygen tubes and IVs. I wanted to remember every image of this lovely day and carry them to her hospital room.” (1)

Do you suppose that the Psalmist might have been remembering a day similar to this as the images of Psalm 8 flowed from his quill onto the parchment spread before him? The details of his day would have been different, of course. It would have been not bluegrass music, but the melodies of Hebrew children’s voices that he would have retrieved from his auditory memory bank. The moms he

saw playing with their children would have been clad in clothing resembling burkas more than bikinis. And the mother for whom he wished to savor and remember every minute of that lovely day would not have been tethered to oxygen tubes and IVs in a modern hospital room, but lying beneath the folds of a tent on a pallet stitched together from animal hides.

But the sky. Ah yes, the sky.

The sky of which the Psalmist wrote, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established,” the lightning and thunderheads that Mary Pipher saw on the Fourth of July, the vast Carolina blueness of our Memorial Day Weekend sky—it is all the same sky.

Often, when we look at the sky, what moves us is the sky’s immensity. Buoyed by scientific knowledge, we are aware of the enormity of space, that our planet, our planet’s moon, the sun about which the earth revolves, the galaxy in which we make our home, each is only a minuscule part of what we call the heavens.

Surely, the Psalmist had something of a sense of the largeness of God’s creative artistry as well.

But it may well have been that the Psalmist grasped something about the character of God from his observation of the sky that we moderns may miss.

The ancients viewed God as a literal architect who had sat down at a cosmic drafting table and designed a domed building. The dome was the “firmament” that we read about in Genesis 1; it separated the waters above the earth from the earth beneath, in their understanding. This domed firmament kept the sky from falling and 100% chance of rain from being the permanent weather forecast.

Thus when the Psalmist and his contemporaries tilted their eyes skyward and drank in the beauty of the moon and the stars, it wasn’t the unending infinity of God’s greatness that impressed so much, I think, as it was the sense that God has designed this beautiful, cozy place in which each and every one of us human beings have worth and we all have a connection to one another and not just as human beings one to another, but to plants and animals as well, and not only are we connected to each other, but we have a responsibility to care for them and how we carry out that responsibility really matters to God who is the divine architect who planned it all out in the first place.

Psalm 8 is the poem that the Psalmist wrote upon remembering a day when things seemed to fit together, when things seemed to make sense about how it is with God and with us.

Perhaps you yourself would express the connection between God’s sovereignty and human mortality and responsibility in much the same way as the Psalmist did, by writing of an experience of looking up at the stars and moon sparkling like diamonds flung upon a velvet sky. Perhaps you would express it this same way.

Or perhaps you would express it differently.

Perhaps instead of writing about moon and stars and sheep and oxen and birds and fish, you would write about a time when your whole family was together at the dinner table and nobody had to

rush off to a meeting or to soccer practice but you just talked and talked, not about homework that needed to get done or home repairs that were crying for your attention or how your favorite sports teams stood in the playoffs, but you talked about real things, the matters of your hearts, and, as you talked, things that feel so disconnected sometimes somehow seemed to fit together and you didn't want it to end.

Or maybe you would write about singing in a choir when the sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses resolved their voices into a chord, and there was the palpable sense of being one, a part of each other.

Or maybe you would write about walking in a CROP Walk or working on a Habitat crew or returning from a youth mission trip and the way that things just felt happy and good.

Or maybe you would even write about a time when you experienced something that was incredibly sad. Perhaps you were standing at the bedside of someone whom you loved who was dying. The sense of loss you were feeling was overwhelming really, but at the same time, you had the strongest sense that you were not alone. In a way that you would never be able fully to explain to anyone, Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection became utterly true for you. God, who had lost a son to death, and Jesus who was raised from the dead to eternal life were with you; the line between life and death seemed so thin as to be almost invisible, and in this there was great comfort for you.

When Mary Pipher asked her mother what she believed would happen after her death, her mother responded, "I don't know what the architecture will be like up there." And this is often the way that not only death is, but life too. Death, and life too, the meaning that resides in them—it is all such a great mystery, and it is often a struggle for us to try to make sense out of them.

But sometimes...sometimes...sometimes, the way that things are between God and nature and human beings does seem to make sense, that they have been crafted with great care by an Architect who loves us beyond our imagining, and when things do fall into place like that, then Psalm 8 gives us the words to say, "O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

1. Mary Pipher, *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families* (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1996), 223-224.